

**Strawson doubts that the question whether determinism is true is a significant one for morality. What are his reasons, and is he right?**

By Denise Hunt

Determinism is commonly characterised as the thesis that all events have a cause, and that this necessarily includes human actions. If our actions are thereby made inevitable, have we lost all claim to having free will? Philosophers tend to focus within this debate by zooming in on the special case of morality: if it were to pass that determinism were found to be true, how can we be held accountable for our actions, an accountability that morality seems to demand? P. F. Strawson's game-changing 1962 paper 'Freedom and Resentment' argued that the whole debate was mistaken in its conception and had failed to grasp the fundamental place of morality in everyday interpersonal relationships, and, moreover, just how impervious it would be to any theoretical claims about determinism. How did Strawson argue for this conclusion and what are we to make of his reasons?

Disputants prior to Strawson's paper tended to centre around two main camps. First are those generally termed Compatibilists (referred to in his paper as Optimists), who feel that even in a determined universe moral practices - such as allocating praise and blame - would still be justified. A Compatibilist may point out, for example, that we know some acts are coerced (say, due to psychological compulsion) and we equally know that certainly not all acts are like this. The other camp Strawson calls the Pessimists. These are more usually called Incompatibilists, and they argue that this is not freedom enough and we can either have morality and not determinism, or determinism at the expense of morality. Strawson's paper is a Compatibilist attempt to reconcile Incompatibilists and Compatibilists.

Strawson says he is going to move away from the usual terms of the debate for he feels that it has been over-intellectualised and that the 'cool, contemporary style' of recent philosophy ignores how things are for real people in everyday human interactions (1962, p.198). Instead, he says, he will focus on (1) what he calls personal reactive attitudes - resentment, gratitude, and the range of reactions in between - which we have when we feel that someone in our moral community has exhibited ill will, or a lack of good will, towards us. And then (2) our moral reactions, which are for Strawson, by analogy, the generalised, impersonal, vicarious counterparts to the personal reactive attitudes. These occur when we have reactive attitudes on behalf of another person (and, thereby, resentment translates into indignation, say).

Strawson's focus is on the reasons that our reactive attitudes are sometimes modified and he finds two groups of reasons. The first are those where we excuse the agent because he did not intend the injury, he "didn't mean to", or was left with "no alternative". At no point do we suspend towards this agent our normal reactive attitudes or view him/her as someone towards whom they are inappropriate. Strawson is more interested in the second group, where we no longer consider the agent to be acting responsibly, and this he divides into two subsets. The first involves those cases where this is viewed as a temporary lapse ("he has been under very great strain recently", for example). The second sub-group is more important to Strawson's needs and centres on cases such as schizophrenia and psychological compulsions which 'invite us to view the agent himself in a different light from the light in which we should normally view one who has acted as he has acted' (1962, p.199). The agent is seen as "morally undeveloped", not part of the moral community, not a fitting target for our usual reactive attitudes but requiring, instead, what he terms 'the objective attitude'. He/she then becomes a subject for treatments, cures, training, and so forth.

Now we get to Strawson's central point. If determinism is true, would it be the case that morality should be abandoned and the objective attitude applied to all? His answer is a very clear no and is founded on three observations. One, current reasons for suspending reactive attitudes never concern whether determinism is true or not. Two, even if we wanted to, we could never abandon our reactive attitudes wholesale: it is 'practically inconceivable' because the 'human commitment to participation in ordinary interpersonal relationships is...too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted' for a theoretical conviction to have any impact (1962, p. 202). Three, Strawson observes that whilst critics might retort that it would still be rational to attempt to change our moral framework, this is to fail to grasp the import of the human commitment involved and, what is more, even if we were able to do so, rationality itself would prompt us to choose the social practices that allow human society to flourish. Thus, Strawson concludes, the Incompatibilist need not resort to what he calls 'the panicky metaphysics of libertarianism' (1962, p. X), namely, require that determinism is not true before we can have morality. Rather, the very fact of morality is constituted by our unshakeable commitment to our interpersonal relationships.

It is hard to overestimate the impact that Strawson's paper had on the free will debate. It respects and reflects our experience of having free will and our attribution of moral agency to those around us. Yet, there is a range of criticisms that can be made. The first questions his claim that the truth of determinism could never lead us to abandon our reactive attitudes. In fact, Strawson grants that it would not be self-contradictory for it to do so, nor is it 'absolutely inconceivable' (1962, p. 202): it is only inconceivable on practical grounds. Moreover, Strawson allows that, whilst the framework of our interpersonal attitudes cannot be questioned from the outside, internal debate is possible. Thus, might we not ask whether internal theoretical issues could change the whole framework given enough time? Frameworks change over time in the light of scientific and metaphysical developments. It may take a century or more but religion/divine agency is now not the framework for many people the way it once was. Likewise, models of disease involving demons, witchcraft, fate, and god, have given way to germ theory and genetics.

Is Strawson right that incorporating determinism into our framework would lead to a 'sustained objectivity of inter-personal attitude' entailing a type of 'human isolation' that we would be incapable of undergoing (1962, p.202)? The Incompatibilist philosopher Derk Pereboom (2002) argues that the truth of determinism would merely make some of our reactive attitudes redundant whilst others would survive and come to the fore. Yes, Pereboom says, gratitude would go but feelings of thankfulness and joy would remain towards those around us even if we knew their behaviours were determined (in the way that we now have such reactions towards a pet). Resentment and indignation will be replaced by concern. Strawson's social practices would still flourish (in fact, in the face of determinism being true, society would be a better, more fair, more just place without the retributive punishments and injuries that resentment and indignation can lead us to inflict on others). Thus, determinism is significant for morality because we have a range of reactive attitudes to choose from and we need to get the choice right. We would still be moral agents but with an updated conception of moral responsibility.

Finally, is Strawson's anti-theory stance correct? Is he *under-intellectualising*? Irrespective of whether humans can or cannot change their reactive attitudes, should the role of philosopher be reduced to that of mere observer? Philosophy stands outside of given frameworks all the time in order to debate whether they are rational or not (to ask, for example, does god exist?), and Incompatibilists may challenge attempts to sidestep theoretical issues, arguing that there are very

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real consequences for people if they are on the receiving end of our morality practices - we need to know whether they *deserve* them. This is why the debate rages on (and Compatibilists and Incompatibilists have not gone away).

To conclude, we have been looking at an outline of Strawson's attempt to end the impasse between those who say that determinism would be compatible with our notions of morality and those who say it would not. We have looked at some possible objections to this attempt which, whilst it was seminal, was certainly not the last word on the subject, as demonstrated by the plethora of publications, podcasts, and university courses which still address it nearly sixty years later. Physics and neurobiology are in the business of researching determinism and, surely, it would be strange indeed for philosophers to proclaim that nothing these disciplines can ever say on the subject could be of practical interest to humans.

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